

A HORRIFYING PAIR OF SHORTS



THREE SHORT STORIES BY
EDWARD G. TALBOT

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three short stories
by

Edward G. Talbot

SAMPLES

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Sample of Story #1

Full Moon Over Camelot

"My lord, we should not be here after dark. The lion shifters are known to hunt in this forest." The squire Athan struggled to keep up with Sir Gabalot as they left the well-worn path and headed into the shadowy woods of the Cambrian Mountains. This was his first trip home to Wales after going to Camelot to serve Gabalot, one of the great Knights of the Round Table. A dozen knights of lesser renown accompanied them to the coast, seeking to fight the Irish raiders who pillaged the seaside villages.

"Nonsense, boy. We'll encounter nothing that the steel of Logres cannot dispatch to Hell with one blow. I didn't earn this Red Dragon –." He thumped a huge palm across the emblem on his chest. "– by running away from a mythical cat. We save a day's journey by crossing these mountains, and we have time yet before the sun sets. The waxing moon will light our way after that."

Athan exchanged glances with the only other squire from Wales, Rogan. He saw the same fear in the man's eyes. But the rest of the group mumbled words supporting Gabalot's bravado. His chest tightened. They'd be going forward, into what his people called the the Forest of the Beasts.

He wanted to turn back, wanted to run. But he wouldn't abandon his dreams of serving King Arthur. One day he would ride into Camelot as a knight. He shrugged off the chill from the wind and pulled his leather cloak tighter around his shoulders.

Something brushed against his face, and his heart raced as he whirled and raised a hand to find the branch of a spruce tree. He was glad that Gabalot hadn't noticed, but he heard snickers from some of the others. He needed to calm down, to stop worrying about the tall tales of his youth. Whatever was out here couldn't stand up to this many English knights.

An instant later, the darkness erupted with sound, a thrashing in the underbrush that turned every head. Then a creature launched out of the woods at Sir Gabalot. By the light of the torches, Athan could see matted gray fur and rows of jagged teeth in a dripping, snarling maw. Gabalot didn't even have time to put a hand on his sword before the mouth closed around his neck. Streams of blood spurted in three directions, including into Athan's face.

He would remember Gabalot's scream in his nightmares. The throat wound did nothing to diminish the volume of his cry. The creature stood nearly as tall as a man, yet moved with a sinewy grace beyond human ability. Fur covered the entire body except around the eyes, where the skin shone pale in the light of the full moon. Black whiskers under the nose seemed to never stop twitching. Gabalot put mailed hands around his attacker's neck, trying to shake it loose. Athan's own face was an arm's length from the creature's eyes, raging yellow orbs tinged with red. He'd heard the tales about these eyes. They belonged to were-lions.

The creature roared and kicked at Gabalot's legs. They fell to the ground, and Gabalot appeared to gain the advantage by landing on top of the fiend. But the fingers, with inch-long yellow claws in place of nails, scraped at the knight's maille vest. Athan's breath caught in his throat as he watched them hook under the waistline and tear a gash across Gabalot's exposed belly. The back legs pistoned against the knight's lower body, as if tenderizing fresh meat.

Gabalot's second scream wasn't nearly as loud. His hands moved from the creature's neck to his own exposed entrails. Blood and intestines and shite spilled from his gut. Even in the poor

light, Athan could see the blood pumping buckets through his fingers.

Another knight stepped forward, sword ready to strike. The creature threw off Gabalot with one kick of its powerful hind legs and swiped a paw at the newcomer's legs. The knight gasped and dropped his sword as he fell backwards.

The creature rolled back to Gabalot and once more gripped his neck with powerful jaws. Two more mighty shakes of its chin, and Gabalot's severed head flew towards Athan. With unconscious instinct, Athan reached out as it struck him in the chest. His fingers curled around the smooth metal of the helmet, and he toppled backwards. A coppery smell overpowered his nostrils, and he felt dizzy. The last thing he remembered before passing out was staring at the bloody face, pain and surprise still evident in the dying eyes.

* * * * *

"My friends, the time has come for Camelot to fall. As the rightful heir to the throne of Arthur, it is my duty to stop the destruction of the kingdom. The quest for his precious grail has weakened the king, and even as we speak, enemies are preparing to test his resolve."

Mordred spoke in a loud voice to counter the snarls and throaty rumbling from the werelions. Dozens of them had gathered in a clearing deep in the woods. They hissed as they wrestled and rolled in the dirt, four inch claws drawing blood in furry haunches and thick manes. Just play between creatures who only enjoyed a few hours of freedom each night. One of them threw off its opponent and stretched on its hind legs to nearly six feet tall. Its voice still sounded human, although the tone seethed with rage.

"And why should we care? We go where we want, the kingdom is terrified of us. When we want blood we take it."

"Ah, but just think about how much better it could be. What does the prophesy say about the kingdom?"

Most of the lions stopped fighting and looked at him. Mordred could sense the tension, the typical feline combination of caution and poised energy. He knew he had their full attention.

"It is written that a wolf shall lead the cats into the sunlight. The realm is still protected by the druid, but even now my mother, Morgause, has breached his spells. With the fall of Arthur, his power will be broken, and the magic of the witch will grant you permanent shapes."

The only sound now was the wind blowing dead leaves out of the branches. He filled his lungs with a slow breath through the nose, feeling the rush of control. At this moment, they would do whatever he asked.

"The wizard is still strong. But Morgause has conjured an ally for us. A brute to push aside the swords and crush the horses. I give you, Borgaz"

Even before he finished, the lions started moving. Pacing, sniffing, growling at the trees on the east side of the clearing. A thunderous sound assaulted their ears, and most of the lions shrank away. Trees snapped to the ground, and the full moon revealed a huge monster. . .

. . .Continued in the full ebook

Sample of Story #2

Femoral Depravity

"Gators. Had to be."

Robinson Fletcher unleashed a torrent of Skoal juice as he surveyed the scene. His partner, Detective Bo Shatner frowned and stared at the palmettos surrounding the corpse, wondering if the smell was getting to Fletcher, too.

"Maybe. But I ain't never seen a gator attack like this. Have you?"

"Sheeit, B., you'n me both know we can count the gator attacks we seen on one hand. Most folks don't mess with 'em, and they're mighty shy around man-sized targets. Truth is, we got no idea what a gator attack looks like."

"I ain't arguin' that, but it don't seem possible for one t'just eat the legs and arms and not even scratch the torso."

"Whatever. You wanna call this in or you want me ta do it?"

"Nah, you do it."

Bo watched his partner disappear through the narrow break in the morass of bright green flora. The squad car was only fifty yards away, but it felt like another world in here, even with the remnants of vagrants and lovers scattered in the small clearing. They'd need a crime scene unit and a couple of uniformed officers to secure the area.

An hour earlier, a bird-watcher had called 911 to report a dead body, then hung up before leaving her name. They'd traced the call to a pay phone a couple of miles away, but the caller had long since vanished. They might end up trying to track her down, but Bo's decade of experience in South Florida homicide told him that this victim had died a few days ago. He couldn't imagine a killer waiting a week and then calling it in.

He felt acid rise to the top of his stomach as he looked at the remains. Bo didn't want to think of this *thing* as a former human being, what with both arms and legs missing. But the head of sandy blond hair hadn't sustained much damage, and even with closed eyes, part of Bo imagined the victim looking up at him in agony. Blood turned black from exposure had dried around the arm and leg sockets, and the ragged flesh suggested some powerful force tearing at this man's limbs until they came off. Or maybe his partner was right and an animal had bitten them off. He still harbored serious doubts about that possibility.

What remained of the body showed signs of damage from smaller scavengers, but nothing to indicate a predator powerful enough to rip off a leg. A big gator could do it, but a gator wouldn't have left this much intact. What kind of animal eats the arms and legs and doesn't touch the tender mid-section?

Bo turned away again and took in his surroundings. In recent days, the skies had followed the traditional Florida pattern of opening up for an hour every afternoon, and dark mud oozed from the flat ground in several places. Fletcher had stepped in one such spot when they'd first arrived, cursing at the damage to his well-polished shoes. Bo tried to imagine sitting in the clearing's single wooden bench and relaxing in the solitude of the woods, but his mind couldn't make the transition.

He'd learned early on in his career not to focus too much at grisly scenes like this one. He didn't want to look at the victim any longer than he had to, didn't want to encourage the nightmares sure to come later when he and his wife turned off the halogen lamps by the bed. A

gunshot, a stabbing, or even a brutal domestic beating wouldn't have fazed him, but he'd never seen another human being literally torn apart like this.

A crash echoed from his right, and he gasped. The crashing continued, sounding as if some giant animal was surging towards him. He drew his gun from the shoulder holster and felt a small measure of confidence from the familiarity of the action.

Then a shape burst through the trees into the clearing, and a blur of brown flashed in front of him. Bo almost pulled the trigger; in fact he didn't know how he managed to stop himself. The white-tailed deer took three more bounding steps and disappeared.

Bo felt his hands shaking as he lowered the weapon. What the hell had gotten into him today? At least no one was around to -

"What are you doin' with the gun out?" Fletcher's voice sounded serious, so he must not have seen the deer.

"Thought I heard somethin'. Figured better safe than sorry."

"Yeah, well like I said, it was a gator. And I'm sure you figured that the killin' didn't happen here - not enough blood. Unless you step on a snake, worst thing that'll happen to you out here is a mosquito bite."

Bo took a couple of deep breaths and looked at his partner. "Yeah. So, when are they comin'?"

Fletcher's grin contained a brown remnant of the Skoal. "A coupla units are on their way now, be here in ten minutes. If we're lucky, we'll be outta here before dark."

Bo looked at his watch: Five in the afternoon. He didn't have anything planned for the evening, but he knew Robinson would. His partner was a bachelor, and Bo enjoyed Fletcher's tales of his exploits. Bo loved his wife, and had never considered straying, but he was married, not dead.

"So, B., I got twenty bucks says it was a gator. You game?"

Bo returned the grin, his crooked teeth betraying both a modest upbringing and a stubborn refusal to seek a remedy as an adult.

"You just can't let it go, can you? Okay, you're on. Twenty bucks says there's no way a gator killed our John Doe. . ."

. . .Continued in the full ebook

Sample of Story #3

The Donor

That light. What the hell was that? I was blinded, barely able to keep my eyelids unsealed. A more important question occurred to me – where was I? I tried to remember and it started to come back to me. A bad day at the office. Moe's tavern for drinks. Getting into my car to drive home? Oh, dear God, was that a seatbelt I could feel around my ribs like an amorous gorilla?

Through the windshield of my Toyota Land Cruiser, I now saw another car bathed in the glare of my headlights. It took a few moments to register that it was a Mini Cooper, because I wasn't used to seeing them upside down. Or with the driver's side door ripped off. I took a deep breath and a hot bolt of pain shot from my neck to my lower back. I cried out, unable to stop myself.

I looked down and saw that my left leg was twisted at an angle that seemed improbable. But I felt no pain there. The tingle of fear started creeping through my brain – I was seriously hurt.

"Ned Sanders, is that you?" A deep baritone reverberated through the car. I turned my head in a wild corkscrew, settling on a man standing just outside the shattered glass of my window. The move triggered the pain once again, but this time I could only feel it near my neck. I wondered if that was a good sign or a bad sign. Then my thoughts turned to the man, and I figured this must be the other driver.

"Huh, yeah. Thank God you're all right. What the hell happened?"

The man chuckled and I could see more of him. He wore an immaculately tailored pinstripe suit. His eyes danced red under the streetlight, and his black Van Dyke beard didn't have a hair out of place.

"Oh, Ned, Ned, I can see we need to acquaint you with the reality of your situation. I'm not the man from the car. In fact, that man is – well, see for yourself."

Somehow my vision improved and I could see right into the Cooper. The occupant was still in the driver's seat, but his face was not identifiable as human with all the blood that covered it. Huge gashes of flesh had been torn from his chest. His fate was all too clear. I closed my eyes, but the vision did not disappear. For the second time, I cried out. I heard the voice again.

"Time is short, buddy. And you have some decisions to make. As it happens, I have a proposal that might interest you."

I opened my eyes, finally able to shake off the picture of the dead man. I heard my voice as a raspy whisper. "What in the name of God are you talking about?"

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